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"What, exactly, do publishers do?"

By B. W. HUEBSCH

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THE RICHARD ROGERS BOWKER
Memorial Lectures have been established at The
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the study of book publishing in the United States
and the problems common to authors, publishers,
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17. BOOKS AND THE FUTURE: A SPECULATION. Dan Lacy. 1956
18. AMERICAN BOOKS IN THE NON-WESTERN WORLD: SOME MORAL ISSUES. Datus C. Smith, Jr. 1958
19. BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY. B. W. Huebsch. 1959

Busman's Holiday

By B. W. HUEBSCH

WHEN I SAY that I regard the invitation to read a paper in the series of Bowker Lectures as an honor it is not the perfunctory statement made on such occasions for, in a sense, the Bowker Foundation symbolizes my life in the book trade. I will speak personally for a moment, and try not to do so after this opening.

Important as were Mr Bowker's services to the cause of a suitable copyright law, to education and civic reform, I count the establishment of the *Publishers' Weekly* as his great contribution. That periodical has been integral to the trade from its beginning; it was no mere recorder of events, it assumed leadership, grew in influence, and became indispensable in all countries where books are published. The *Publishers' Weekly* is regularly read and referred to in every publishing office in Europe that I know.

The *PW's* distinction did not come about magically but by the projection of personality; those who guided the magazine's destinies were dedicated to our trade, and to them the famous quotation from Bacon at the masthead was not rhetoric but a credo. It was not bombast when I spoke about the significance of the name Bowker to my association with book publishing: my very few meetings with Mr Bowker took place not long after I rushed in where angels fear to tread, as a publisher. They were not meetings of importance; indeed, I do not remember why I had to see him; I remember only the awe he inspired (almost anybody awed me in my salad days), and his graciousness to a nonentity. That was the beginning of my relations with the editorial office; since Mr Bowker's time every one of his successors has been my friend, and this succession of friendships intertwined itself in my career.

The first in that rich experience was Adolph Growoll with whom I was associated for several years on the Board of Managers of the Booksellers League of New York. He was wise and kind, and his German thoroughness was tempered by humor. He was already oldish when we met, or seemed so to me; he stimulated me in the rather quixotic plan to establish a school of bookselling — an old idea of his own — which actually came into existence and lived fitfully for some years. Mr Growoll's successor as editor was Fremont Rider, a man so completely identified with writing, printing, editing and librarianship that I should not be astonished to learn that his blood is mixed with printer's ink. A pleasant recollection of our years together is that

he printed the weekly paper, *The Freeman*, which I published during its unforgettable four years.

My association with the editors of the *Publishers' Weekly* can be divided into three periods: awe, when I first met Mr Bowker; esteem, when Mr Growoll and Mr Rider were in the saddle, and affection, when the next three held sway. Professor Robert S. Lynd, of Columbia University, was an experimentalist in his youth; he was testing life; like Jurgen, he would try any drink once, and so he had a draught of editorship. Another draught, which was highly agreeable to me, at least, was his essay in publishing; he wisely thought he could best learn the ropes in a small shop, so worked for me until fresh woods and pastures new (if that describes Muncie, Indiana) beckoned and he and Helen, his wife, produced "Middletown."

Fred Melcher then appeared on the publishing scene and eventually became master of all he surveyed. He had his eye on us long before he came to New York from Indianapolis, where he had paused briefly en route from his own Boston. (An odd detour!) In 1916, when I was struggling with that school for booksellers, I had a letter from Fred who was running the W. K. Stewart store in Indianapolis, saying that he had read in the *Publishers' Weekly* of the school and enclosed a check as a token of his approval of the enterprise. Parenthetically, he later shared the work with me and took over completely when I left the country for a year. This is not a biography of Mr Melcher; his career as editor, inspirer, crutch, shot-in-the-arm, to booksellers, publishers and librarians is an open book to the devotees of our guild. The two great awards that he instituted, the Newbery Medal and the Caldecott Medal, have been a magnificent spur to the writing and illustrating of children's books and have given new dignity to that delightful category. By natural selection, Mr Melcher leads our trade.

The last in my third category of friends who wielded the *PW's* editorial blue pencil is the present incumbent, Mildred Smith, last, but not least in love. She follows worthily in noble footsteps, by which I mean that she, too, has proved herself the right man in the right place. I could not wish my fifty years of friendship to be rounded out more satisfactorily.

"In our hours of ease . . ."

When statesmen have worked hard at affairs of state and want to recuperate, they take to the links. The weary publisher, his work less onerous, though by no means less honorable, than that of the statesman, links up with others of his sort when he needs to relax, and gets his second wind by talking shop

with his business cronies. Nothing more or less than a busman's holiday. Not that publishers don't play golf too, but, like all workers in and near the arts, who identify themselves with their chosen task, their happiest hour is when they stop work to talk about it.

Such meetings are informal and occur more frequently by chance than by design; it may be at lunch, or at closing time, or it may be when a few men choose to remain for a chat after a trade conference. And just as there is no set programme, and no attempt to settle any one problem, or to discuss problems according to their weight or urgency, these notes of mine, or reflections, will be casual, incomplete and inconclusive. And quite without authority. If they should cause an eyebrow to rise they will have proved themselves appropriate to my title.

People who know how to read and are curious about the facts of life in the book world often ask "What, exactly, do publishers do?" (The word "exactly" is redundant but people talk that way.) And when the answer trickles out, they are bored, for what they hear is the commonplace of all business, and what they *hoped* for was something romantic, revealing and daring.

Bookish people seek the romantic because their real interest lies not in what publishers do, but in the mystery of authorship, in the personality of writers; and properly so; for nothing better can be said of a book than that the writer shines through his pages and makes people want to know him; to them he is an extension of his work. Readers sometimes surround publishers with an aura that derives from their association with authors, hence the well-known and well-worn remark, generally uttered with a sigh of longing, "You must meet such interesting people!" It is true. Nobody is more interesting to publishers than authors, and not because of their love of authors, but because without authors there would be no books, hence no publishers or booksellers, hence no book readers.

Having conceded that authors are the *sine qua non* of our whole structure, it may be admitted, privately, that all authors are *not* the most interesting people whom publishers meet. Indeed, it is uncommon to meet successful authors who are as interesting as their books. It is, perhaps, that they put all the best of themselves into their books, and we should be content that it is so.

Publishers and authors often establish friendships or close understandings that transcend their business relations. Their association is such as to make mutual trust, if not friendship, imperative. One author of international fame for years signed the contracts that his publisher laid before him, without troubling to read them. Another case of the confidence that marks such

friendships is that of a famous American and his London publisher; a single sheet of paper, scribbled many years ago, is the basis for their business dealings. It reads, in effect, "I understand that you will publish my books," followed by initials, and underneath the publisher wrote, "I will publish your books," and initials. This course is not recommended (not all authors and publishers being like the two here concerned); it is cited only to dispel a notion that publisher and author cannot live happily together.

But a thousand things may interfere with their bliss. It is sometimes the case that publisher and author see each other too frequently, and at too close range, during the publishing process. Both are likely to become tense: the author, naturally enough, thinks in terms of the importance of his book which, to the publisher — however he may respect it — is but one item on his season's list, only a fraction of the year's investment. Happily for both, very few authors can be on the scene during the entire period of turning a manuscript into a book. A not uncommon point of dispute is advertising space; the two parties will disagree as to the adequacy of the publicity allotted to a book. Author and publisher may have different views about the number of copies to reviewers. Sometimes an author will tend to hold his publisher responsible for the failure of reviewers to notice his book. Variations on these themes in the author-publisher relationship are sure to be heard when the busmen commune with one another. No problems are ever settled; no problems are new.

Not all of the busmen are what might be called "big" publishers. The business happens to be one where magnitude and modest dimensions have much in common. No publisher regards himself as being more important than another because of his size, any more than would the letter "s" consider itself more important than the other twenty-five merely because more words begin with "s" than any other letter. The distinction between "large" and "small" publishers relates to the number of dollars' worth that they sell in a year, not considerably to the literary quality of their respective lists. It happens that a small publisher becomes a large one; it is uncommon, however, for a large one to become small. There are no shrinking publishers.

It is hard going for a small publisher; he competes in a market in which the rules are made by comfortably capitalized firms who can outbid small ones in buying manuscripts, who can outspend them in advertising, whose volume of trade is so great as to reduce their overhead expense to a workable point. The dice are loaded against the small publisher. The mention of dice is not inopportune, for those inanimate objects respond alike to rich and poor, and an occasional lucky throw — say, a new author who hits it off unexpect-

edly, or the adoption of one of his books by a large book club — may keep a small publisher going nicely for a while.

As often as not a lucky throw may prove the small publisher's undoing. William Heinemann is said to have remarked that nothing can be more disastrous for a young publisher than a great success. It may not be the worst thing that can happen to him, but it is dangerous, in that he finds himself obliged to readjust his scale of operations to the demands of a single successful book, enlarge his quarters, his staff, his advertising and — according to the custom of these days — even his entertaining. When the sale has ceased (and it has a way of doing that with disconcerting abruptness), and business has become normal, he discovers that he has metamorphosed himself into Goethe's Sorcerer's Apprentice, who learned how to bring the broom to life as his master had done, but forgot the magic word that would restore the obstreperous broom to its corner. Except that in the case of the publisher the magic word is needed to keep the business going!

Luck is an uncertain crutch. Capital, though indispensable, is not in itself too sturdy a crutch in a business that is based on inspiration — a word that one uses gingerly. Money has to be paid to authors and for business expenses, but money cannot write a book. Money also serves a publisher to equip elaborate offices and make a grand splurge in advertising (if he is ambitious thus to impress the public, authors and authors' agents), but unless it be backed by critical intelligence, and flair (which the Oxford Dictionary defines as "instinctive discernment"), the glitter of the new furniture will wear off and the rhetoric of the advertising will vanish into thin air. In the book world capital does not back publishing: it is publishing that backs capital. But, though capital cannot provide inspiration, it sometimes provides needed artificial respiration.

One cannot forbear being cynical, for it is unhappily true — perhaps better to say happily true — that in practice some firms (with amiable busmen among the partners) amble along without bothering to hitch their wagon to a star; to put it politely, they are dull. If they bring out, unexpectedly, a work of literary merit (we all do occasionally) it is because, in the great shuffle, a good book may wake up in a strange bed. It is not accident — it may even be deliberate — that mediocre books preponderate in such lists. It is because the mediocre preponderates in society. It is easier, and more lucrative, to follow the public than to try to lead it.

The small publisher bows into the scene not so much under the illusion of large pecuniary returns as because the vocation seems the right outlet for

his aptitudes and ambitions. Not seldom it is vanity, or the desire for power, or self-importance, or even the desire to meet "those interesting people" at a commanding point. And, besides, "it's nice work if you can get it." Whatever the reason, his choice places him in a position of greater social significance than most posts in the world of business.

Small publishers can exert an influence on the trade in inverse ratio to their size. It may be surmised that the small publisher is not wholly satisfied with the world as it is, that he hopes for a better order of human activities. His choice of manuscripts, therefore, will be in the direction of improvement, reform or revolution. Given some skill in evaluating material, in stimulating writers who hold with his views, his publications are likely to provoke curiosity even if they lack conspicuous merit; and his efforts may bring about an integration of the scattered readers who are attracted by the ideas of this lone rider. That is to say, he may establish a following.

It is not contrary to the theory of probabilities that publishers watch each other and pick up an occasional hint from a competitor's performance, and sometimes detect an omission or weakness which they will repair in their own version of the project, if they should undertake one. It's all quite legitimate, for there is no new thing under the sun. The hint or idea may come from a small competitor's list as well as from a large one; the small man is not necessarily brighter or more original than the large one, yet if the premise be correct that our ideas drive us into the arena to fight for them (as Heine put it), observers are likely to be on the *qui vive* for his ideas. And because of the high mortality of small publishers his "discoveries," if there be such, and such of his ideas as have signs of life, stand a better chance of surviving on the list of one of the more powerful concerns than on his own. Publishers need not be reminded of examples. It was not mere chance that the most influential American political writer of our day made his first appearance between covers under the auspices of a small publisher. The publisher is gone; the writer's subsequent books have been brought out by large houses.

An outstanding example of the book as an implement for the dissemination of ideas is the Left Book Club, established propitiously (before the second World War) by Victor Gollancz of London who, with Harold Laski and John Strachey, constituted the Club's board of editors. Radical public opinion of England needed only this brilliant enterprise to integrate it; excellent literature became available to the editors, for supply responds to needs in critical times; the price was low, the publicity effective, and subscribers

responded with almost religious enthusiasm. Superior in importance to the sale was the fact that the members actually congregated, in localities large and small, to discuss the books and to debate on their subjects. The Left Book Club was perhaps the first club that was a club. Gibbon's dictum, "The use of reading is to aid us in thinking," would have been an appropriate motto for that club. Byron echoed Gibbon, but in verse:

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,
Falling like dew upon a thought, produces
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think.

But some drops of ink can operate to corrupt the thinking of millions, and though we may trust the slow mills of the gods to pulverize perverted thinking, the immediate responsibility for the validity of what gets into print rests on the publisher. He cannot be expected to test the worth of every book for its power to survive the strictures of the future, but we may hope that he will set high standards for himself.

The business of communications is not quite clear-cut. Radio and television are privately owned yet subject to license and government supervision. Newspapers and books, too, are privately owned and subject, if they are to be transported by mail, only to post-office regulations. But by unwritten law all publications are in the public service. The newspaper publisher is free to omit news and to reject advertising at his pleasure; the book publisher, too, may choose, or reject, books, as he wishes. The newspaper owner is so well aware of the importance of his obligation to the public that he prints even what he doesn't like, though he exercises his right to play it down as to length and position. He is unlikely to go to the full limit of his rights, for time and experience have made him conscious that *all* the news is fit to print. The minute he discriminates he begins to lose his customers' confidence.

The book publisher's relation to the great public is of a different nature; he has not even an implicit agreement to open his facilities to all schools of thought. If he happens to be a church-goer it is his right to decline manuscripts that make light of religion; if he is conservative in politics none can object to his refusal of a manuscript that extols radicalism. But to limit himself to his rights is to reduce his usefulness to the community and to impair his possible value as a factor in creating and leading public opinion. He remains a specialist, but of significance only within his chosen area.

It is not of him that I wish to speak but of the publisher who delights in the opportunity to add to the sum of human knowledge; whose activities parallel and equal, besides supplementing, those of a university faculty; whose capacities bring him closer to fundamental education than most newspaper editors; who can open the door of the world to inquisitive youth; whose contacts enable him to give deliberate expression to the research, the experiments, the meditations, that reflect the scholarship and the arts of this maddening, miraculous age.

No publisher can do this alone; it has to be done according to the rules of business practice. There are stockholders who must approve; staff to cooperate and, of course, the scholars to supply the manuscripts. But we have had, and we have, men in the trade whose ideals approximated those we set for ourselves, and incidentally, they have made it pay. The stockholders of a company headed by a man of constructive mind always say "Yes." The staff get their enthusiasm from the leader. And there are always the secretaries who smooth the way. What would the publishing business be without our secretaries? Certainly less glamorous.

Important among a publisher's duties is the obligation to his author, not merely in the details prescribed in a contract, but in supporting his views in case of attack. He must refuse to be dictated to, whether by his customers, be they individuals, booksellers or library boards, or by censors, official or unofficial. Should a book that he publishes be in violation of a statute the law will take its course, and if the law, or the course, seems to violate his rights he should dispute it, in which endeavor he will find willing and strong support, now that enlightened courts are revealing our Constitution as a virbrant, living instrument.

The author whose point of view may be assailed must rest secure in the knowledge that the publisher's acceptance of his manuscript was a pledge to its support. The history of books and the theatre has been shamefully bespattered by jacks-in-office who are cunning in finding ways of thwarting progress; there is withdrawal from circulation in libraries; there are obscurantist laws enacted by legislatures because citizens disregard their civic duties; and sometimes we have to resist the revival of archaic statutes. Against such interferences the author must first look to his partner, the publisher. If they resent such encroachments society will always produce adequate defenders, as we have had them from Milton to Mencken, from Andrew Hamilton to Clarence Darrow. As we have them today in the American Civil Liberties Union.

"Rugged Individualism"

A wag among the busmen suggested that the result of the recent election in Great Britain must have relieved the Prime Minister of any fear that his publishing firm would be nationalized.

The private ownership of publishing may not be a perfect system but it is better than if the government were to take it over, with the consequent danger of political wire-pulling in the editorial office and also of possible changes of policy according to the prejudices of a new party in power. One envisages Congressional committees exposing a previous administration's choice of manuscripts; or an astute member from Hawaii or Alaska smelling out subversion in the liberal use of quotations from a particular foreign language. The quadrennial party platforms would expatiate on the virtues of Republican fiction or Democratic pedagogical theory. The Superintendent of Literature would be appointed on his record as a party pamphleteer. Official censorship would be frowned on, but a politically dubious manuscript would encounter strange delays in production.

On the return to power of a defeated party the dusty old unreturned manuscripts that authors had, for four years, been hoping to hear about, would bob up once more, and the principles that inspired them would now become the literary law of the land.

An alternative to nationalization is cooperative publishing, with authors themselves as owners and managers. Selection of books would be by committee pledged to issue only meritorious works. One shudders to think of those editorial committee meetings, and the disputes that would arise out of the common dedication to unselfishness and a high literary standard!

Or, again, we might have a consumers' organization that would lift book publishing high above the profit principle, political corruption and authors' wrangling. The voice of the reader would be heard in the land. What the public wants would at last be revealed to us. All and sundry would be invited to buy shares and elect a board of directors to include authors, critics, booksellers, experts from the extinct fraternity of private publishers, and even advertising men, but with a preponderant representation of the man in the street, that is to say, our old friend the average reader. With all its faults, private enterprise still seems to be the only practicable method of publishing books.

Who reads?

It is easy enough to publish, but what about the reader for whom we publish? Many of you will remember the column of wit and wisdom, "The Conning Tower," that appeared in the *New York World*, and in other papers before that. Mr F. P. Adams, who looked out on life from the Tower, once observed that when we speak of the "average reader" we mean the average non-reader. Publishers often discover the truth of that bit of sarcasm when they bring out a novel with which they hope to make the lowest common denominator vibrate lucratively; more often than not it is received stolidly by reviewers (the only integrated body of readers that we have, and even they don't always read), and not received at all by the non-reader whom we delude ourselves into believing to be a reader.

How to create readers: that is the problem. The glib solution is advertising, but that is futile in this context; another advocates emphasis on the social standing implied by the display of well-bound books, or recently published books, on the living-room table, *i. e.*, the snob appeal. But that has to do with the selling of books, not with the cultivation of the reading habit. Further advice is equally unimaginative: radio lectures on books and authors, television interviews with authors, literary editors and professors of literature. Volunteer advisers are always certain of the efficacy of appeals by television, for though it is asserted that television is the enemy of reading, they believe that its magic will convert non-readers into book addicts who, presumably, will then not look at television. Paradoxical reasoning that is hard to follow.

Thoughtful citizens will continue to doubt whether admonitions or promises will alter people's instincts greatly, and whether sweet reason will convert a man from poker to Montaigne. Our non-reader may look with admiration at posters that celebrate the joy of reading, and he may listen for a moment to slogans, but such incitements cannot, anymore than a surgical operation, make a book reader of him.

He may occasionally allow himself to be pressured into acquiring a set that will bring culture and health to the whole family, but our present concern is with reading, not salesmanship.

It is a pleasure to turn from adults to children; their response justifies optimism and high hope. The occasional danger resides in too much reading. There are children who take to the habit as a duck takes to water; they read early and often and without restraint, wildly. As to the others, the experience

of parents, teachers and librarians demonstrates that they lend themselves to direction.

Exposure to books, and to book talk in the family and its circle of friends, is potent; so, also, is contact with those teachers who allude, with diplomatic casualness, to books germane to the subject that they teach, to books of tangential interest. And once the child is steered into the public library with its trained mentors and attractive displays — we need not leave this building to prove the point — his imagination is kindled and the flame can never be extinguished. Happily not all these children will become the questionable thing that is called an “omnivorous” reader. The hunger that impels one to *eat* indiscriminately, implies the need for medical advice. We all know adults as well as children who *read* gluttonously without becoming wiser, happier or the more useful to society. Eventually they yield to the murderous practice of reading to kill time.

Reading is not an end in itself; if there be no concomitant thought or action the addiction to books connotes nothing but indolence and the formation of a bad habit. Some of our best friends read “everything,” which generally means much of the “latest” and nothing of the earliest. A reader of that sort would do well to devote a little of his time to something else, say birdwatching, or gymnastic exercises, or both; he would at least sharpen his vision and improve his physique, and perhaps be led to read about birds, and thus find a new significance in books.

Reverting to the subject of wooing the child to what we like to call the right kind of reading, let us not be over-fearful of his finding the wrong kind, that is, literature (real or spurious) intended for his elders. We properly protect the young mind as we protect the young body; we enjoy baby's first steps but do not encourage him to attempt them too early. Some young minds are in danger of being crippled by contact with ideas for which they are unready, hence the care with which children's books are selected. But it does not follow that children old enough to display curiosity about other literature than that in their nursery library should be punished for that curiosity or forbidden further adventurings if their crime be discovered. Once having tasted blood they are likely to seek out more dragons to be slain; and how good a time they can have at it is known only to those of us who have read adult books before our time. For the most part the “naughty” aspects of a story glance off their backs, they are unintelligible to them; what they want, and get, is the story, the characters, the excitement of the world which unfolds in novels for the grown-ups, whose literary

pabulum is not essentially unlike the child's. The forbidden shelf is the one the child eyes most eagerly, and if he is intelligent it may be wiser to shut our eye to his misstep and hand him — oh, any good adult novel you like, instead of returning him in chagrin to the "Five Little Peppers."

Almost everyone, in childhood, has read, often surreptitiously, books that made him tremble at the nature of his newly acquired knowledge, and at fear of being discovered, but how many of them, in retrospect, regard themselves as the worse for it, or would, if it were possible, wipe the episode from their minds?

On book design and production

One of the satisfactions of busmen's conferences is that they seldom dispose of a subject. All the business of a meeting is unfinished business, for even though, by common consent, authors and agents are difficult, overhead is unnecessarily high, advertising is wasteful, and large discounts to book-sellers make profit impossible, these matters are treated as if they hadn't been discussed to the limit on former occasions.

But there are variations on old themes, as when the operations of the production department happen to be the subject. There may be discussion of whether the title on the backstrap of a thin book (or its jacket) should read from top down or from foot up. This has been a favorite subject for generations; there is no right or wrong, it is merely a matter of taste, and it can be resumed with gusto at any time. Jackets, too, are debated, and hotly, some holding that the expense of elaborate drawings and color printing is a waste because, in a bookshop window crowded with similar "art work," as it is called, no one of these rainbow jackets can stand out conspicuously; they melt together like the remains of a dish of raspberry and chocolate ice-cream. But habit is stronger than reason, and the advocates of jackets with a lively picture generally cry down the argument that attention can best be arrested by contrast, and that a plain but well composed type jacket is likely to hold the eye in a display of many 5" x 8" landscape and figure compositions. A study of the relation of jacket-design to sales might reveal — and it might not — that there are as many failures as successes among books with attractive jackets. It might reveal that the jacket plays a smaller part in gaining reader attention than is supposed. But a striking jacket will perhaps fetch an additional one-half cent in the remainder market.

When on the subject of the jacket text, what to say and how to say it, the meeting will develop a mood of unity; nobody will defend the exaggerations,

extravagant statements and dubious claims that, somehow, nestle as comfortably on book jackets as in political platforms. And of course they will deplore jacket copy that testifies to the writer's failure to read the book, though they will incline to indulgence on the ground that the publicity department was overworked. And here they may express irritation at being needled by book reviewers who review jackets instead of books.

There are still some publishers who cherish what they think is conservatism in respect to book designing; who resist the accepted tendency to regard the material book as a thing of consequence. They will not fail in respect for good composition, press work ("machining," they call it in England) and binding, but look askance at the professional typographer and book designer as interlopers. Art, they say, should be kept in its proper place.

Most of the busmen make short shrift with those traditionalists, yet they will admit that their typographers, eager to employ unusual type-faces, odd combinations of rules and ornaments regardless of the nature of the text, disclose incomplete comprehension of their task and stand out as exhibitionists rather than artists. The traditionalists may not grasp the importance of presenting books in attractive dress, but they are irked by what they regard as the designer's derogation of the book to a frame for the display of his talent. That some pages of our books flaunt the vagaries of designers who are hard put to it to find new expressions of their art, cannot be denied. The reader wants a book to read; his needs are best met by an unobtrusive type-face in a size appropriate to the measure (width), of the right leading (space between the lines) placed so as to appear to be in the center of the page. He does not mind a decorative letter as an initial to a chapter if it doesn't interfere with his instant grasp of what the author is telling him; his eye is trained to the use of italics for purpose of emphasis, or words in a foreign language, but he is annoyed at having to read whole paragraphs in italics.

But there are some readers who lurk near a special Tarpeian Rock of their own for the book designer who puts the folio (page number) elsewhere than in the upper or lower outer corner of the page or in the center at head or foot. His fate awaits him if he substitutes words for Arabic figures; one may be 1, but not for purposes of folios. References to Chapters in words rather than in Roman or Arabic numerals are no less reprehensible. A really serious fault in books of a scholarly nature is the omission of the chapter number at the head of every page if superior figures are used to direct the reader to notes assembled according to chapters at the end of the book. Such omission obliges the reader to thumb back to ascertain the number of the chapter he

is reading before he can identify the note. Not only purchasers, but occasionally even a publisher who reads one of his own books becomes furious at this shortsightedness that hamstringing an otherwise well made volume.

At this particular meeting of the busmen one of them may call attention to a newly published book of which a signed, limited edition, has been issued. This is likely to evoke a chuckle, or as many chuckles as there are members present. They remember the day — not so long ago — when this procedure (known in other trades as a racket) was common. The limited edition was often printed on the same cheap paper as the regular edition, the author signed on an inserted leaf of good paper that bore a statement of the size of the edition, and a serial number; there might be a fancy end-paper, and the binding would be costlier, but not necessarily more beautiful. The author received a premium, and the purchaser paid several times the price of the ordinary edition. It worked for a while; who knows, it may work again.

Now and then an author reveals an interest in the looks of his book, and displays an affinity for form and design that enhances the publisher's pleasure of working with him. Not those writers who have read somewhere that publishers enjoy their cooperation in all of the publishing processes, but those whose talents in other arts than literature manifest ability to suggest and criticize creatively. It is natural that there should be authors among painters and draughtsmen; they often have gifts for expression in two mediums; book-designing is merely an extension of one of them. Then there are writers who so keenly love their art that they think of beautifully made books as models of the form for their own finished work. Their participation sometimes develops an interest in the wider aspect of book-making — content, dress, and advertising — and gives rise to a feeling for publishing in general.

In all ages authors have fallen for the fascinating play of printing, under the narcotic odor of printer's ink, and the spell of "the case." ("The case" is the receptacle from which type was set before the day of the machine. There was one for capital letters, and one for small letters. Hence "upper" and "lower" case.) Some authors yielded so completely to the printing art as to set their own work in type and without the intermediate stage of writing it on paper; thus composer and compositor became identical. History records many personages in whom writer is combined with printer, translator, editor or publisher. In one manner or another — to cast a wide net over time and space — Caxton, Blake, Balzac, Retif de la Bretonne, Whitman, Henry George, B. L. Farjeon, Horace Traubel — lent a hand in the processes by which manuscript becomes book. The arch example, of course, is Dard

Hunter, who has, himself, performed every operation in the writing and making of a book and the paper on which it was printed. I enjoy the possession of a modest volume — one of 500 copies — entitled *Living Thoughts*, whose title-page states that it was “written, printed and published by Samuel Tilden,” a printer, in Malden, Mass in 1914. The author writes: “A large part of the book was never written, many pages having been set direct from the case without copy, except that seen with the inward eye.”

A dream come true

But in the trade we are concerned with large editions, and today the cheap book's the thing.

The spread of books in paper binding is like a dream come true; good books, and many of them, at prices that all can afford, that can be easily replaced if lost, lent, or given away when shelf-room is lacking. Books are made to be read, not necessarily to be preserved; we are well rid of the traditional reverence for books merely because they are books; it is the content that counts. We like the books we own to be well made, but admiration for good book-making, as such, lies in a different category from literature. And in still another category are those costly specimens of the binder's art that enjoy perpetual rest in glass sarcophagi in the homes of wealthy collectors.

The cheap book, widely distributed and cleverly displayed, itself provokes greater interest in reading than do the movements organized to achieve that end. The mere presence of those books is more effective in diverting the stream of casual readers into rewarding channels than pious adjurations to peruse great books in sets of five feet, more or less.

Whether the market for paper covered books is likely to be oversupplied as a result of competition is not our affair; as book readers the advantage of a wide variety of choice accrues to us. Yet, plenitude may become plethora, with the possibility of congestion in the channels that carry the product from publisher to buyer. It is said that more than 100 publishers are engaged in producing paper covered books. It may be that we are choking the goose that lays the papershell eggs.

With the first flood of books at twenty-five cents, booksellers rejected the innovation because they could not afford to make sales at so low a unit price. Twenty-five cents belongs to the distant past! Now there are stores that sell *only* the paperbacks; they flourish where rents are cheaper; they need fewer assistants, for the buyer serves himself, as in automat restaurants. The low-price book finds its way to its many outlets by means of the distributing organ-

izations that serve magazines of national circulation; now we have it everywhere, in drug stores, news stands, super-markets, and at what used to be known as the five-and-ten. The old-time bookstores have adapted themselves to the inevitable and are making the inevitable pay. But the cheap paperback that started the avalanche is fading out, and at this date the prices are equal (but in attenuated dollars) to those of the cloth-bound book of a generation ago.

The development in books parallels that in other competitive goods, and the discerning customer perceives that there are various levels in value, grades in content and in production, and that, as in hard-shell books, there can be good publishing and — not so good. But to the extent to which easy availability can be an incentive to improved taste, the cheap book is a boon, and one savors the thought that a chance purchase may lead a young reader to the delectable land of literature.

Cheap books of literary quality are not new; the Tauchnitz edition, which began more than a century ago, was a forerunner; but the amazing movement of today derives, in its best aspects, from the British Penguin books, a series admirable in selection and editorial supervision, produced and promoted with taste and dignity.

Books as objects of commerce are in a class by themselves and it stands to reason that the vendor must be an uncommon person, trained to his task. The subject of the bookseller and his place in the ideal society — or even in our society — deserves discussion that is not possible here, though it is a staple of busmen's conversations. Suffice it to say that there can be no substitute for the bookseller. Buyers who know what they want pick up their book and pay for it, but most people wish to receive it from sympathetic hands and want to talk about it, or about other books. The circumstances in which books are acquired are woven into them and are long remembered. We have to bemoan not only the fact that real bookshops are so few, but that many people never see them and don't know what they are for. Has it not been your experience to hear somebody whose interest has been aroused by conversation about a book say, "Where can I get that?" If the same person had chanced on the mention of a new Scotch, would he have asked that question?

Advertising mirrors personality

Meanwhile the publisher, in his search for the elusive book-buyer, cudgels his brain about the high cost of paid advertising that doesn't pay, and the sometimes higher cost of free advertising known as publicity that often repre-

sents a loss. The soul of P. T. Barnum lingers in the breast of every publisher's publicity man, and if he doesn't strive to emulate the great showman he seeks at least to profit by his inspiration. But he is restrained from such feats as digging up a Cardiff giant or importing another Jumbo by the flood of popular books on archaeology and jungle exploration that have educated the public. Fortunately for him the last few years have produced infant writers of masterpieces; also there are always television and radio interviewers to ask authors to unburden themselves on pressing subjects, such as the cold war and the cost of living. Literary lunches and cocktail parties are almost passé, but will do for publicity at a pinch, and there are always autographing parties, *i. e.*, authors' appearances at book shops to inscribe copies of their new books. The anonymous book trick doesn't work well any more — nobody cares much — but it may be revived at any minute. The publicity man, or woman, yearns for more croquet boxes and more Malahide Castles to yield more hidden Boswells. Sinclair Lewis, himself no mean publicity man, once rejected a Pulitzer Prize, a gesture far more effective for free newspaper space than the bestowal itself. It can't happen again, but there are publicity men who would make real sacrifices to obtain that prize for one of their authors — and be satisfied to have him keep it.

A distinguished publisher, one of my predecessors in the Bowker Lecture-ship, Alfred Harcourt, summed up wisely the problem of advertising books: "I am convinced [he said] that in the long run advertising that is not informed by a thorough knowledge of the book itself, the author's personality and underlying purpose, and the general policy and development of the house of issue does more harm than good."

The implications are that a house has a policy (*i. e.*, serious aspirations in a considered direction), that authors are beings in their own right and not merely instruments for the production of literary merchandise to be marketed according to a formula, that advertising can backfire injuriously, and that advertising imposes the responsibility of presenting one's wares truly.

One may further deduce that a publisher is mirrored in his advertising for, whether an imprint conjures up the picture of a single owner, or represents a corporation, the house becomes known by the manner in which it announces itself in print; its advertising is a reflection of personality. An imprint (to the minority to whom an imprint means something) becomes identified with the text of an advertisement and its typographical presentation, however various the modes that advertising necessarily assumes in the service of the multiplicity of demands of a miscellaneous list. Too often publishers, absorbed in

carrying a project through successfully, and beset by conflicts and difficulties that are part of a complex business, lose sight of the long-term value of restrained and sober statement.

To serious readers an imprint acts on the imagination and evokes what might be called a portrait; not a likeness that can be reduced to paper, but a mental conception of a face, or countenance. Everybody who is interested in publishing is aware that certain houses do have a countenance that is made recognizable by their own particular merits. But, by and large, as in other lines that border on art and business, there are more masks than faces.

The editor

Before the book can be advertised and sold it has to be written and published. Those procedures are not too simple, as many an author knows. In the course of his experience he encounters the editor.

The editor, as that word is used in American book-publishing, is likely to be an accomplished man of letters — perhaps a journalist, or a teacher, before he entered the trade — on easy terms with those in the arts who know a hawk from a handsaw; an agreeable talker and good companion.

On the way to his present post he will have worked in various departments. He will have had to do with writing copy for jackets and advertising (not too grateful a task for an honest man), getting publicity for books and authors (*i. e.*, hobnobbing with reviewers and editors of book review pages, drinking with them, and sometimes eating); with manuscript reading; he has toyed with type, paper and design in the production section and participated in the periodic conferences at which travelling salesmen are briefed about forthcoming books. He enlarges his horizon by correspondence with distant authors, sometimes with those whose manuscripts he rejects, oftener with those whom he may be grooming for eventual entry. One wonders how the editor manages always to have time for a chat, or a drink, or both.

He is no longer the innocent who believes that the printed book is what its author wrote; he has, himself when a copy-editor, adorned the inviting broad margin of a manuscript with ironic queries to the author.

A man of letters at a copy desk develops insensibly into editorship. His knowledge of the history of literature usually expands his curiosity as to other languages than his own, his contacts have familiarized him with the artistic temperament; his observation of the vagaries of popular taste as manifested by the flood of new books has sharpened his sense of selection.

It is, then, a practiced person who comes to the aid of manuscripts that are wanting in some respect. His counsel may be the making of a fumbling talent in need of constructive criticism; and it may be no less beneficial to an author of vivid imagination who lacks skill in presentation. And there are old hands, successful writers, who never outgrow the need for intellectual wrestling during the period of literary gestation; the tough editor is born for such writers to try their teeth on. Even the champion heavyweight won't enter the ring without first submitting himself to a stiff regimen under a trainer; and a good editor is a trainer.

Sometimes a good subject and good thinking in a manuscript will be obscured by careless arrangement or turgid language, and the author consents to have it rewritten. The rewrite man will probably be one of those war-horses who can write "like a streak" but have no ideas of their own. He may collaborate with the author or do the whole book afresh under the editor's direction.

The editor may, at times, lend a hand in writing, but his business is to advise and recommend. When an author proves stubborn there may be a battle until one of the two is exhausted or convinced. No good editor wants to win at the expense of an author's views, or to obtain a compromise that will dissipate the author's peculiar flavor, the distinctive element that made the manuscript desirable in the first instance. An editor is sleepless in his search for good new books; his great ambition is to find writing talent that will push forward the frontier of art. All the more reason, then, for sensitive treatment of unfamiliar forms.

In a period of lively competition, with publishers scouring a lamentably arid world for grist for their mill, the tale still goes around that they are indifferent to manuscripts by unknown authors. (People tend to forget that every author was once an unknown author.) Nothing could be further from the truth. If there were an instrument corresponding to the seismograph that would register the faintest vibration of an ancient typewriter clicking in the antipodes, or the burning of midnight oil in a garret in Ljubljana, every publisher would have one, and it would be the central object of attention in the office. Like a ticker in a stock-broker's office. At the slightest agitation of the machine one of the firm would be ringing up an agent.

It is the first reader whose ears twitch and whose nostrils tremble if a manuscript by an unknown proves readable. And it is he who is likely to insist on attention to unripe works that suggest evidence of talent. The story of publishing is rich in examples of mistakes, of manuscripts rejected by ten or twenty firms before they found a welcome. Some men of determination

have had to publish their own books, but mistakes will continue to be made until soothsayers take over the business. "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen," but there is no record of an important piece of writing that failed to find its public, even though the author's glory has, on occasion, been posthumous.

An editor, in his capacity of scout, is not satisfied to wait for the objects on which his skill is to be exercised to come to him. He has a feeling for talent, and his sympathetic friends abet him in his search. The field is wide, but the important sector in the reservation is that occupied by literary agents. The editor maintains active relations with this tribe, but pursues an active search in other equally obvious directions. College teachers can be counted on to recommend talented graduates; scrutiny of the reviews — quarterly and hebdomadal, slick and pulp, neutral and partisan — starts a flow of correspondence with contributors who display even a modicum of ability; no new contributor to the periodical press can fail to receive, on the morning after publication, twenty-five letters from publishers complimenting him (her) and asking for an appointment to discuss a book by him (her), preferably an autobiography if he (she) be still under twenty-one.

The seemingly best soil in which literary talent grows is the school for writers. If writers aren't to be found where the young idea is taught to sprout, where else?

The editor's search has not been a solitary one; he has been joined on the way by his friendly competitors. They tread the same path, play bridge with the same agents, they are after the same young graduates, and they vie with one another in a devious search for advance proofs of the magazines. But it's nice work —

The book editor has become an institution, and like all else that we accept because it was once accepted, it runs the danger of defeating the purpose that brought it into being. Concede that many a merely passable manuscript has been tailored into a readable book by an editor; the question arises: How many readable manuscripts, touched with talent not too easily discernible, have been converted by a well-meaning editor into a merely passable book? One asks oneself what a high-powered critic would have made of Laurence Sterne. Here is Sterne's own comment on critics:

And what of this new book the whole world makes such a rout about? — Oh! 'tis out of all plumb, my Lord, — quite an irregular thing! — Not one of the angles at the four corners was a right angle. — I had my rule and compasses, etc., my Lord, in my pocket. — *Excellent Critic!*

One thinks of Beckmesser!

Doubtless some of you have in mind masterpieces of another age that might not pass muster today. How many of them would have got into print unmanicured and unshorn if they had had to run the gauntlet of one of those editors who, if need be, would cut *Les Miserables* and *War and Peace* to a practicable 320 pages? Consider the abridgments of famous novels that have found their way into the market! To say nothing of five or six modern stories in one volume, dehydrated, in air-tight containers, ready to take home. The blue pencil is such a tempting instrument! As smooth and lethal as a Raymond Chandler ice-pick.

Arrogant editing can do things to manuscripts that would not be tolerated in the other arts. The laws of perspective have been outraged in many canvases that are sacrosanct to the connoisseur; sculptors have flouted Nature in chiselling the human form even to the extent of making great holes in it; there are painters to whom objects are two-dimensional. Editors who are guided by what they think the public thinks it wants would hold a tight rein on such experiments. They would make the Lord order Abraham to sacrifice a chicken instead of Isaac. They would probably restore the leaning tower of Pisa to the perpendicular, and would virtuously have returned the manuscripts of some of Beethoven's later works with a suggestion or two for simplification.

All honor, then, to the editor as the coadjutor of creative imagination, who restricts his corrective surgery to the limits of the author's conception. It is for him to remain within bounds, but it is not for him to restrain the author from *breaking* bounds, or to tamper too freely with the author's extravagances.

The copy-editor who prepares a manuscript for the printer according to the rules of style adopted by his house fits into the editorial scheme behind the editor. And it is he who asks the author questions and ventures to correct his errors, of which there are generally many, even when the author is literate.

Even experienced authors need, and are grateful for, critical scrutiny of a work to the petty errors in which they have been blinded by too close application. Such are anachronisms, anachronisms, contradictions in the plot, absentmindedly calling the heroine Susan after she has been introduced as Florence, or changing her eyes from blue to brown. The Scotch author of a jolly satire on America has his hero order a telegram to be filed at the post-office, forgetting that in our country the telegraph system exists for profit.

If the editor, or copy-reader, is a bit of a crank about our language he may venture to communicate some of his idiosyncrasies to the author.

He may object to "like" for "as if" (but there he is hopeless!), he may resent the recent fashion of "presently" for "at this time"; "reportedly" for "it is said"; "currently" for "at present"; this same killjoy writhes at thoughts of the physical contortions implied by "centering around" and "centering about." He smiles wearily at "the two [or more] protagonists" and refers the author to Fowler's irony on "protagonist." The crusty (even if young) copy-editor objects to "Frankenstein" when "Frankenstein's monster" is intended, though he is aware of distinguished opposition to his pedantry. But he doesn't care. Like many lovers of dictionaries he resents their tacit approval of uses that are without other authority than an ancient misuse. Some day a bold lexicographer, taking courage from the verbal barnacles already illicitly lodged in our dictionaries, will give us "irregardless," and "impossible" in two words, and perhaps "include me out," because such usage is said to have Hollywood approval. Joseph Conrad tells us in *Lord Jim* that Marlow's listeners lay prone in their deckchairs. Surely he meant that they reclined, for it would have been double torture to lie face downward during that monologue of hundreds of pages.

Among the bones of contention in publishing offices is the question of adapting English style to American practice in books that originate in England, for publication in the United States. We are reluctant to retain words, phrases, allusions and perhaps quotations that may fall on uncomprehending ears. Copy-room taboos include locutions and idiomatic expressions strange to American books and newspapers. One can understand a taboo on dialect that requires a glossary, but if an English character wishes to cock a snook why should we make him thumb his nose? If he refers to "a peppercorn per year" when on the subject of rent, it should afford us pleasure to inquire into the origin of the term and widen our knowledge of social history. An American candidate for office gets no forrader by running than an Englishman does by standing. To substitute our terms is to lose something characteristic that gives the book color and atmosphere. By retaining allusions to traditions that illuminate the mores of another society we set the reader a slight task that is its own reward.

Not many American publishers, and surely few English publishers, are likely to agree with me about this. The attitude of one English critic is expressed with unintentional humor in a recent London *Times Literary Supplement* in a review of a book by an American on an American subject; he says that "it is not intolerably exacerbating in its inevitable use of American currency, weights and measures, and spellings."

"Prize me no prizes!"

The belief that awards of medals or money for "the best" stimulate and improve production by artists and appreciation by the public, continues to be held widely. There can be no question as to which is the fleetest horse, the most skillful tennis player or the best speller; there are recognized rules for games and sports, and there are photographic or tape records to confirm the judge's decision.

But art isn't sport. The competitive system isn't appropriate to art; one can say what one *likes* best, but not what *is* best, for there are no standards by which imagination or inspiration can be measured. Asked to choose the best book, other than fiction, a jury may face an epic poem, a bit of humor and an account of the Tilden-Hayes campaign of 1876, among other dissimilar works. All are written in readable English and are marked by respectable craftsmanship. What are the rules for determining the best? Is tea better than coffee? "The best" is generally the result of compromise, and compromises mean that two, highly favored, have to give way to a third, generally lower in the scale of merit.

Different in essence are the prizes offered for the best solution of a problem such as might be presented in a specialized area, say housing, traffic regulation or banking; or for the most enlightened observations in a particular branch of learning. An example is the historic award to Rousseau in the contest established by the Academy of Dijon.

It is a creditable thing to honor meritorious work in the arts by means of a public award, even without claim that it is superior to other works in the same field; and such bestowal is a healthier incentive than a choice by the point system which is a negation of art. One is always glad to hear of tangible rewards to artists, they surely need the money, but it is a mistake to think that such winnings improve the quality of their art except to the extent that they temporarily alleviate their burdens.

As one looks back over the record of competitions one finds great names among the winners. That proves nothing; it could not be otherwise; prizes are often won by the competent in the arts; but none was made great by a prize; it is the prize that often achieves distinction because of those who won it. Prizes have as much to do with competence as numerical standing on graduation with scholarship. Somebody has to be first in the class, but most of the world's work is done by those who were inconspicuous as pupils. General Grant was 21st of the 39 West Point graduates of his year; he is nevertheless said to have been a great soldier.

There are prizes and prizes: in one category are the awards for non-competitive literary work, retrospectively considered; in another, entries are made as one presents home- or farm-products for a medal at a county fair — by which no disparagement is intended, for such competitors may be as serious in intention and as skillful, as growers and breeders, as authors and sculptors. In the first category the most conspicuous bears the name of Alfred Nobel; the author is honored for his *œuvre*, his achievement as a whole. Candidates do not offer themselves but have to be formally sponsored. It is regrettable to have to add that even this most dignified among international awards which, in the past, has gone to great names, is under the suspicion that its selections are not unrelated to considerations of international amity.

The intent of the second category (typified by the Pulitzer Prize, highly regarded because of its eminent sponsorship) is different; here the competitor (or his publisher on his behalf) is present as a challenger; and he enters the lists with a particular literary work. When the white smoke (as in elections to the Papacy) ascends from the Columbia chimney, to announce the selection (*i. e.*, that a compromise has been reached by the jury), the author of the “best” gets generous cheers. But history proves that he will be equally successful as a candidate for oblivion unless the public confirms the jury’s choice. If it be argued that competitions are valuable for the public interest they create, the answer is that such interest is in competitions, not in the arts.

In our age private benefactions are still important to the promotion of the arts. The rich Foundations are performing gratifyingly. An older one long ago set a fine example by awarding grants of money to artists and scholars at work. It is enough to mention the name of Guggenheim. There should be more of those admirable retreats which permit artists to pursue their course for a substantial period of time in freedom and comfort. A laudable aid to aspiring talent takes the form of private grants to tide writers over the period of creation, without imposing any obligation on them. One such award that I am glad to mention honors the memory of Eugene F. Saxton, an American publisher of distinction whom the trade remembers with affection.

A necessary evil?

A subject which the busmen are likely to discuss, and animatedly, is the rise to power of the literary agent. No longer do fat and prosperous publishers conspire against grasping authors; no longer do the authors pursue their vendetta with the publishers. The Hatfields and the McCoys have all

but merged, and the cease-fire is coincident with the firm establishment of the agent as a factor in the book trade.

A study of author-publisher relations before and since the advent of the author's agent would be a rewarding task. The material ranges from long before *Evelina* (18th century sensation), the publisher of which was ignorant of the identity of the author who received £20 for the copyright, to our own era when Bernard Shaw paid a royalty to his publisher.

The study would reveal the nature and extent of the power that vests in agents, and it would show that the significance of the vocation rests in the personality of the agent. The agency business is less highly regarded than the individuals who conduct it. An agency commands respect and exercises influence only as long as it is led by a capable person with a competent crew. Good agencies have expired with the departure of their owners; others have survived where an experienced person has taken over, but an expert successor is not always available. In our memory a noted agency, conducted for years by a man who earned the confidence of famous authors, collapsed after his death because his successor proved unworthy. It is the practitioner that counts, not the field of his activities, as purchasers of physicians' practices have often discovered.

The literary agent has been carelessly called a necessary evil. The complexities of business have made him necessary, but there is nothing evil about him. The bad specimens live only long enough to be a nuisance to publishers, a parasite on authors and a dark shadow on their own guild.

How different those who enjoy the cooperation of authors, publishers, magazine editors and buyers for the lucrative audio-visual branches. Adequate representation of authors implies expert knowledge of the potential purchasers' business. That is no small requirement, for the kaleidoscope of the printed and spoken word — the filmed and spoken story, the stage with its varied requirements, the magazines of altering names and aims (and changing personnel) — produces a fresh pattern at every turn. In consequence of the fact that many manuscripts lend themselves to patterns produced by the kaleidoscope, an author's interest would seem to be best served by a large firm of agents. But large agents cannot afford to represent authors of an occasional book or story; they can keep going only if their clients produce frequently, or are known for successful books. Agents pick and choose among would-be clients, as publishers in turn pick and choose among manuscripts. The smaller man's occasional advantage lies in the fact that his personal presentation of a manuscript that he has read himself may register more effectively on a pub-

lisher than if it were one of the many offered by agents who have many clients.

As often as not the agent rather than the author turns out to be one of those "interesting people" whose existence enlivens our trade. Some might think that he, as a go-between, hampers the relations between author and publisher. The contrary is the case; friendship is more likely to ensue if the terms of purchase are settled between publisher and agent. The latter generally knows when to bargain, when to make concessions or compromises; he knows publishers' costs, and he knows what the traffic will bear. He does his best for his client, which includes not making oppressive demands on the goose that sometimes lays a golden egg, and sometimes no eggs at all.

The tendency is in the direction of representation by agents, especially in the case of writers whose talent finds several outlets. If the author were to set out to learn the trade tricks that relate to subsidiary rights, so as to direct such sales himself, he would soon be obliged to engage an author to write his books for him.

The agent is not a new phenomenon in the trade; he already occupied an important place in England in the nineteenth century, and he blossoms there more profusely than in the United States where the development began later. The agent never flourished on the Continent; authors and publishers regard him as an obstacle to their close relations; but since the beginning of the substantial traffic in translations, say from the end of the First World War, many European publishers buy and sell translation rights through agents whose sub-agents link the capitals of the world.

The agent has become conspicuous in the world of sight and sound as well as in that of letters. Where once a literary paper would print a portrait of an author with his publisher, it will now show him with his agent. And if the agent's importance continues to earn such recognition as the recent article on his business in the London *Economist*, the literary paper may eventually print the agent's portrait and omit the author.

The greater world of letters

Thoreau wrote, more than a hundred years ago, that the electric telegraph, then being perfected, would make it possible for Maine to communicate instantaneously with Texas. (He added, a little sourly, "and what will Maine have to say to Texas?") We have improved on the electric telegraph, and we and the world have a lot to say to each other about a great many things, though not all of it is of the first importance. The perfection of communica-

tions in recent years, added to the awareness, since the First World War, of a culture older than our own, has had a notable effect on our selection of books for publication. English translations of the classics are an old story, but the European novelists of our own time, except for the great Russians and the outstanding nineteenth-century Frenchmen, were remote from those pre-war Americans who read no foreign languages.

A great change has come about; every publisher's list includes titles from languages whose names we hardly know and from countries whose names we only heard yesterday. Sydney Smith once asked, "Who reads an American book?" Similarly, but less contemptuously, that inquiry might have been made up to not so long ago, about other distant areas. Today every continent yields literature that demands respect and holds genuine promise.

The fame of Continental novels about the First World War — Barbusse, Remarque, Arnold Zweig, for example — stimulated an interest which has grown so widely over the years that our bookshops as a matter of course display translations from all the literary languages of the world. As a result of our expanded foreign relations we get the latest word about authors and books, for our press responds to the internationalism of art; a book that makes talk in Rome or Tokyo is reported here promptly, and even before such report gets into print an American publisher's representative will have pinned down an option on the translation rights.

In this growing eagerness to graft new cultures on our own, it would not be astonishing to hear that publishers are bidding blind for the first novel from the Ghanese, or the Laotian. Those books would not have to be perfect; sufficient that we have come to recognize the importance of letters and art from far away — at least in terms we used to use, for there is no longer a geographical far away.

In every country translations are thick as leaves in Vallombrosa, not merely because of the whole world's curiosity about what is being said and thought everywhere else, but because the momentary literary drought is all but universal. Thus, on a dark night, on the world's literary pathway one stumbles on publishers of every nationality flashing dark lanterns, in their feverish search for translatable material.

No prospector for gold has ever struck so rich a vein as the first translator, whoever he was. To go no further back than the King James Bible (we may skip the Septuagint), the yield has been a glittering one, and though translation may be said to have become common only in our day, versions of the uncommon books have always found a place in the great languages of Europe.

And the beauty of it is that the gold is free to all; there is no Fort Knox of letters.

Some countries produce translations more profusely than others; where culture is high and population small, as in the Scandinavian lands, the demand for recorded learning surpasses the indigenous supply. Similarly, familiarity with foreign languages is more common where educational standards are high, thus many read foreign books in the original language. There remains, however, a popular demand of such dimensions as to make translations a significant percentage of the book production of those countries.

It sometimes happens that a single book can be so outstandingly impressive as to awaken an interest in the literature of which it is a part. Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and Rolland's *Jean Christophe* must surely have aroused the curiosity of many thousands about French writers of their day. It is well to remember that great books are effective in translation only if the translators are great in their profession. Thus Proust is made to live in Scott-Moncrieff's, and Rolland in Gilbert Cannan's, English.

The curtain has been lifted on the literature of the world; our present danger lies in the chance of indiscriminate selection, but the future of translations is assured. That is, if gifted writers in larger numbers will dedicate themselves to translation. Until international copyright was obtainable many foreign authors unthinkingly granted translation rights to inquirers of dubious equipment who made light of a serious task for the joy of seeing their name on a title-page. Their pay was generally only nominal, for the game was not worth the candle to the publisher, since translations were rarely well received. He blamed the book, as a rule, but eventually recognized that the translator was the culprit.

The volunteer translator who "took" French or Italian in High School is without standing today; the professional is coming into his own and his work is often heartening. It must be highly gratifying to him to exercise his mastery of language in bringing another artist's concept to the appreciation of a great new audience.

Stefan Zweig used to urge young writers to improve and sharpen their style by translating writers whom they admired. He himself loved Verhaeren, and his translation of the Belgian, and of others who wrote in French, into German introduced the writers of his choice to a new circle. I like to remember that Zweig collaborated in translating Irwin Edman's little book, *Candle in the Dark*, into German. Foreign literature, in translated form, is reflected in great names, past and present. Examples can be plucked from all ages;

Smollett gave us an English *Gil Blas* and *Don Quixote*; German audiences attend performances of Racine in Schiller's translation, and, not to be invidious, the late Edwin Muir and the living T. S. Eliot have given evidence of the artist's respect for, and ability to grasp, the opportunity that the art of translation presents.

Volumes — interesting ones — have been published about translations; the most recent to examine the philological problems involved is a scholarly work in German, *Meditationen eines Uebersetzers*. We have, too, a narrative of the King James Bible and the process of its translation. The subject is of endless fascination; and of amusement, too; examples of ridiculous mis-translations often enliven busmen's holidays. Nothing daunts the bold translator; there even is talk of a translation into German of *Finnegans Wake*, a task about as easy as climbing the Matterhorn with your teeth.

Many publishers have assisted in awakening a people to the glories that exist in the literature of other lands; conspicuous among them in our time was S. Fischer of Berlin, a pioneer in introducing the Scandinavian master-works of fiction and drama to Germany, to say nothing of his scent for German talent. Another trail blazer was William Heinemann whom readers of English have to thank for their introduction to choice Continental writers. To fail to allude to the intellectual restlessness of Alfred Knopf, when speaking of translations to an American audience, would be to display ignorance or ingratitude. The list that he has given us over some forty-five years is studded with gems from all parts.

Fewer books, please

Does the great increase in book production really indicate a rise in the level of our culture? Is there not a danger in over-production as there is in over-population? Is there any sense in doubling the number of titles we publish to keep pace with the doubling of inhabitants on earth? Is it hoped that we will have two Shakespeares when we have twice the number of people in the world? We may look forward contentedly to doubling the existing copies of the one Shakespeare we have, whoever he may have been, but the likelihood of another Shakespeare as a result of more books is no greater than of improving the race by encouraging a higher birth rate.

In the culture that obtains today we have extolled mere literacy, with the consequence that many confuse their mastery of handwriting with the right to be published. As we climb the educational ladder it is to be hoped that writers may become increasingly critical of their own work and that many

will conclude that their writing served its purpose if it clarified their thinking and improved their style. In many cases microfilmed copies of their manuscript, made available at public libraries, will satisfy the requirements of society. We need more censorship — self-censorship — by authors of their own essays.

A consequence of the expansion of our culture should be a diminution of new books, and an end to the foolish boasting of the increase of new titles. Thousands of books are published every year; many in small test editions, and even those remain largely unsold. These are the books that publishers have brought out in the assumed need of a given number of titles to keep their plants going. They represent not only an economic loss but an encroachment on the credulity of innocent purchasers who believe advertisements, and on the time of book reviewers and booksellers, and they intensify the cynicism with which publishers already view the wares they produce.

The business of publishing will not grow smaller with the decrease in new titles; with planned authorship publishers will have better material to work with and more time to develop the sale of old as well as new books. There will be no stopping vain amateurs from writing, but publishers will find a way of keeping the market open to them without letting them clog the progress of books that have greater claims to attention. This implies closer study of manuscripts and of their fitness for the market than publishers are able to make today. The Messiah who will disclose himself in the trade will find a practicable means of balancing books for the moment and books for survival. He will let in a rush of fresh air that will make for normal breathing, and for the freer practice of what, in reality, is a noble vocation. Publishers will no longer feel constrained to call every bit of fiction a "major" novel and thus leave no appropriate adjective for a Thomas Hardy or an E. M. Forster; they will no longer have to defend the issue of half-baked thinking by explaining that the author's next book may be full-baked, which is less a hope than a fear that a competitor might snap up the underdone author. They will be relieved from creating volumes that duplicate or overlap subjects already adequately covered, and from estimating the market for a book before determining on the contents.

And at this point the busmen went back to work.







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